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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY; INCREASED
AWARENESS BUT SLOW TO CHANGE

1.(U) Summary: Despite a flurry of activities to mark International Women's Day on March 8, real progress on improving conditions for women in Turkey has been limited. Opposition MP Gulsun Bilgehan organized a special women's session in parliament to highlight women's issues in Turkey; only one cabinet minister attended, the State Minister for family and women affairs. Two new women's shelters were dedicated at the Kocatepe convention hall in Ankara, and Turks aired their concerns with a variety of marches and conferences throughout major cities. While honor killings and domestic violence remain serious problems, a few dedicated activists are increasing awareness and sparking gradual change. End Summary.

2.(U) As Turkey's International Women's Day events showed, there have been some advances, particularly for educated women from established families or in urban areas. The newly elected president of the Turkish Businessmen and Industrialist's Association (TUSIAD) is the successful female CEO of KanalD, Arzuhan Dogan Yalcindag. While Yalcindag comes from one of Turkey's leading families, she has parlayed that advantage into an impressive career that has broken barriers and served as a role model. Yalcindag, who founded the Women's Initiative for Turkey in the EU, used her TUSIAD speech to push for increased attention to women's rights issues.

3.(U) Republican People's Party (CHP) MP Gulsun Bilgehan called for greater advancement for Turkish women and girls in her Women's Day speech before parliament. Bilgehan, who is one of the few Turks, let alone Turkish women, to be elected to chair a Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe (PACE) committee, heads the committee dealing with gender equality, honor killings, domestic violence, forced marriages and education of girls. She has spearheaded an effort to sensitize the Turkish parliament to gender issues, distributing a Turkish language version of a PACE booklet on domestic violence to all MPs. The special parliamentary session on women's issues she organized was roundly applauded in the media, which also zeroed in on the one lonely cabinet minister who attended Bilgehan's speech: State Minister for family and women's affairs Nimet Cubukcu. While PM Erdogan has called discrimination against women "worse than racism" and insisted that women must not be treated as second-class beings, his failure to appoint more than one woman to his cabinet is often cited as evidence of Turkey's glass ceiling. The low percentage of women MPs (4.4%) is also indicative of the hurdles women face in obtaining positions of authority.

14. (U) Conferences in Istanbul focused on equality and freedom in order to eliminate the oppression of women. Thousands of Turks marched in Turkey's major metropolitan areas to show support for increased attention on the plight of Turkey's women and girls. While awareness in the urban areas is improving, much remains to be done in the more traditional rural regions. Eight million Turkish women reportedly are illiterate. Despite a government campaign to encourage parents to send their daughters to school, some 640,000 Turkish girls do not attend school and fewer than three percent of women receive a university education. Mandatory schooling for Turkish girls ends at any earlier age (11 years old) than in any other OECD country. Educational obstacles translate to limited employment opportunities; only a third as many women work as men, according to the Turkish Clothing Manufacturers' Association chairwoman, and women are paid on average 50 percent less than their male colleagues. Turkey has been ranked near the bottom of the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Gender Gap report for the last two years, including for mother and child death rates.

15. (U) Against this background, small victories are particularly encouraging. Two women's shelters were inaugurated in the Ankara area on International Women's Day. According to the Social Services and Orphanages Directorate (SHCEK), since 1990 over 6,000 women and 4,600 children have temporarily resided in SHCEK shelters. Press reports state that by the end of 2007, there will 17 SHCEK women's shelters in Turkey, with 13 more planned. The shelters provide refuge for victims of domestic violence as well as women fleeing the threat of honor killings by relatives. Honor killings remain a problem in Turkey, with between 50 and 100 women murdered each year and 17 percent of Turkish men saying they approved of honor killings in a 2006 UN poll. Accurate numbers are hard to determine as some killings are either not reported or are labeled as an accident or suicide. The official number

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recognized by the TGNA is 91 honor killings over the past 5 years. "On paper, we seem to have achieved a lot," said Justice and Development Party (AKP) MP Fatma Sahin, "but when we go into the field, we recognize that a lot more needs to be done." Sahin sponsored and promoted a 300-page report on honor killings that led to legislative changes as well as heightened awareness of the issue. NGOs are also closely engaged in combatting this problem and helping to educate the affected population.

16. (U) Advances are also gradually occurring in other bastions of male dominance. According to Turkey's top religious authority, in the near future female mufti assistants will be appointed to all provinces in Turkey. This will be the first appointment of women in such a capacity in the Muslim world. The women will not, however, preach in mosques.

17. (U) Comment. The status of Turkey's women illustrates the tensions racking the country in a larger sense. Rural to urban migration and increased education are disrupting traditional attitudes. Women, who in many poorer, more traditional areas are still viewed as property men must protect by safeguarding their bodies and minds, are increasingly being exposed to Turkey's modern side. As more women join the workforce, out of choice or necessity, their expectations are rising and their willingness to accept their traditional role is falling. This year's International Women's Day celebration demonstrated that many recognize the challenges that exist and that progress is being made, but there is still a long way to go. End Comment.

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